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What are prayer beads?

Question: "What are prayer beads? Is it okay to use beads while praying?"

Answer: Prayer beads, sometimes called rosary beads, are used in the practice of meditation and prayer. Prayers are repeated a number of times corresponding with the number of beads. Prayer or rosary beads have traditionally been associated with Catholicism, but the use of prayer beads is widespread, with many religious traditions incorporating them.

The basic rosary is made up of 59 beads linked together in a shape that looks like a necklace. Each of the beads on the rosary is intended to have a prayer said while holding the individual bead. Of these beads, 53 are for "Hail Mary's" to be said on them. The other six are intended for "Our Fathers." These beads provide a physical method of keeping count of the prayers as the fingers are moved along the beads as the prayers are recited.

The history of the rosary in Christian circles has been traced back to the Crusades. It is thought by historians that the Crusaders had adopted this practice from the Arabs, who, in turn, copied the observance of using beads from India. Recent archeological findings reveal that the ancient Ephesians made use of such beads in their worship of Diana, also known as Artemis, whose temple was one of the seven wonders of the world ([Acts 19:24-41](#)).

Prayer beads are also used by Roman Catholics to help the practitioner keep track of some 180 prayers which make up the rosary. Examples of such prayers are Our Father, Hail Mary, and Gloria. The practice of the rosary is based on the assumption that repeating these prayers over and over enables the petitioner to secure merit or favor from God in order to escape from the punishment of the fires of [purgatory](#).

The use of prayer beads is not scriptural. Jesus Himself chastised the religious leaders of His time for repeating their prayers over and over. In fact, He told His disciples not to emulate them by using “vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their many words” ([Matthew 6:7](#)). Prayers are not to be merely recited or repeated mindlessly as though they are automatic formulas. Many who use prayer beads today claim that the rosary helps them take the focus off themselves and onto Christ, but the question is really one of the efficacy of repeating the same phrases over and over in a mantra-like manner.

Prayer is an incredible privilege for the Christian, as we are invited by the Creator of the universe to come “boldly” into His presence ([Hebrews 4:16](#)) and communicate with Him. Prayer is the means by which we praise Him, adore Him, give thanks to Him, submit to Him, and bring before Him petitions for ourselves and intercessions for others. It’s hard to see how that intimate communion with Him is enhanced by repeating simple prayers over and over again via prayer beads.

Recommended Resource: [The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution](#) by [R. Albert Mohler Jr.](#)

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